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SUBJECT: Interagency Assessment West Team Report - Cyclone Sidr

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Over the last three weeks, two U.S. Interagency Assessment Teams (IATs) surveyed five sub-districts (upazilas) in southern Bangladesh, which were severely hit by Cyclone Sidr. This report is from the team that surveyed the Morrelganj and Sarankhola sub-districts. Through meetings with local government officials, NGOs, civil society leaders, villagers, and city dwellers, the team gathered a thorough assessment of the situation. Almost universally, people praised the relief efforts of the Caretaker Government, the Bangladesh military, NGOs and the United States military. Equally universally, people questioned when reconstruction efforts would begin. In this already poor region of Bangladesh, people now live under polyurethane sheets, secondary school children study in the open air, and worshipers pray in devastated mosques and temples. Local leaders worry about a food crisis due to Sidr's catastrophic impact on agriculture (70-90% of the rice crop was lost) and aquaculture (most shrimp farms were wiped out). END SUMMARY.

Interagency Assessment Team Approach

12. (SBU) The two assessment teams consisted of U.S. Embassy Dhaka Foreign Service Officers (both State and USAID) DoD Civil Affairs officers, DoD technical experts, and U.S. Embassy Dhaka Locally Engaged Staff (LES). For 20 days, these teams traveled throughout their assigned sub-districts and documented the impact of Cyclone Sidr on communities and assessed relief and reconstruction activities. The teams gathered exact GPS coordinates of important civic locations (e.g., educational and religious institutions, medical facilities, and local government offices), which will assist in future USG efforts in these regions. The teams also gathered information about local government leaders and other organizations involved in the rebuilding and recovery after the cyclone. Finally, using DoD funds, the teams completed a number of small humanitarian assistance projects in affected communities. (NOTE: Cables summarizing the IAT East team's experiences and summarizing the overall effort will be delivered SEPTEL. END NOTE.)

IAT West Findings - Relief Efforts To Date

13. (SBU) The people met by the team almost universally indicated

they were satisfied with relief efforts immediately following Cyclone Sidr, which made landfall on November 15. People felt that the Caretaker Government, Bangladesh military, NGOs, and the U.S. military played positive roles in providing critical, life-saving relief. In addition, the fact that there were no widespread health epidemics reflects both the speed and the quality of the relief and the education provided to the population before the cyclone on good sanitary practices and habits.

¶4. (SBU) With respect to the cyclone's devastating impact on agriculture and aquaculture, the team witnessed NGOs and other organizations providing food supplies, and local markets were well stocked. Many people complained to our team members of the high price of basic commodities. Several local leaders warned that existing food supplies are dwindling due to crop loss, and they said they thought a food crisis could occur in the next month or two as the existing supplies are consumed. Many areas of the assessed sub-districts only produce one rice crop per year, which is not harvested until the end of October or November. As a result, locally-produced rice will not be available to cyclone victims for at least eight months.

¶5. (SBU) The cyclone had a dramatic effect on potable water in the region. Significant work has been done by NGOs to treat ponds that were contaminated by salt water and other debris. However, the team also saw numerous broken tube wells and pond sand filters. There were also many locations where people did not have access to potable water within a 1-2 kilometer radius. It appears that access to potable water was an issue prior to Cyclone Sidr, and this access has been exacerbated further by the cyclone.

¶6. (SBU) The Government of Bangladesh (GOB) is attempting to address

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the housing crisis by providing the following relief to people: 5,000 taka (\$73.50) for fully damaged homes and 1,000 taka (\$14.70) for partially damaged homes. The local governments (Union Councils) provide a list of impacted people to the GOB, and then the Bangladesh military confirms the information through door-to-door surveys. Upon completion of these surveys, payments are provided to the people. Our team observed the military distributing some of these payments. These payments, however, do not cover the costs of rebuilding a home, much less a livelihood. One team saw a family that chose to use the 5,000 taka to rebuild one of its two lost chicken coops instead of rebuilding its home; in the meantime, the family continues to live in a tent on its property. One thousand taka will not even buy a family a bundle of tin to rebuild a roof. A bundle of tin typically costs between 2,500 and 4,000 taka.

¶7. (SBU) Cyclone Sidr also inflicted great damage to many of the regions secondary schools and colleges. The primary schools incurred less damage because they tended to be concrete structures with concrete roofs. Secondary schools and madrassas, however, were terribly damaged by the powerful winds, falling trees, or 8 foot high waves that overflowed embankments and flooded the countryside. The GOB is providing the following relief to secondary schools and madrassas: if a school is fully damaged, it receives 250,000 taka (\$3,623); if it is partially damaged, the school receives 50,000 taka (\$735). The determination of the damage to the school appears to be in the hands of the government of the sub-district, and very few schools received the larger sum. Interestingly, one school received the full amount when the school had only been partially damaged, which raised questions about possible corruption. The team also heard about a "tax" on these payments which reduced the final distribution and also raised corruption concerns. Regardless, the amounts provided to the schools are rarely sufficient for these schools to rebuild. On one of our humanitarian assistance projects, we provided 55,000 taka and that only paid for the tin for the roof on one of the school's two demolished buildings; the school provided free labor to install the new roofing materials. Most school administrators reported estimated rebuilding costs in the hundreds of thousands of taka.

¶8. (SBU) To address the religious needs of the people, there have been no significant relief efforts to date. Mosques and other places of worship have placed signs throughout the area requesting

funds to rebuild. The leaders of these institutions are appealing to members of the community to assist. In some cases, these leaders have been successful, but in many cases, all that remains of the places of worship are the clay foundations on which the buildings rested when the storm hit.

IAT West Findings - Current Reconstruction Efforts

¶9. (SBU) While people universally appear satisfied with the relief they received after this catastrophic storm, they also expressed disappointment that large-scale reconstruction has not started. A prevailing opinion among local elected officials and civil servants in the area is that relief efforts need to stop and reconstruction needs to occur. Repeatedly the team heard from community and government leaders that people are becoming dependent on handouts and no longer looking for work to survive. Leaders consistently praised programs like cash-for-work and food-for-work which reward work and also re-build much-needed infrastructure, such as houses, roads and embankments. The reconstruction needs are vast.

¶10. (SBU) While the GOB provided funds to people to rebuild their homes, the government's representatives acknowledged that these funds would not cover the entire rebuilding costs. As a result, thousands of Bangladeshis now sleep under crude roofs and/or polyurethane sheets. In contrast, our team members slept in multiple layers of clothing and under two blankets just to stay warm during the winter evenings. This precarious housing situation was exacerbated by two days of cold rain that unexpectedly hit the region and served as a reminder that monsoon season is only three months away. While local leaders were aware of some commitments to rebuild homes, our team did not see any evidence of large-scale

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construction. The team heard of a Bangladeshi government initiative to try to enforce more stringent housing requirements for any new houses. While these requirements should ensure more solid structures, they may also result in fewer houses due to increased costs and longer construction timeframes. In addition, local leaders do not know when the government will give final approval to the designs of these homes.

¶11. (SBU) The reconstruction of infrastructure appears to be very slow. The only projects witnessed by the team were limited food-for-work and cash-for-work initiatives that focused on rebuilding roads. Nevertheless, there remain numerous roads where team members had to scramble up, down, and around on foot to continue their surveys. During the upcoming monsoon season, many of these roads will be impassable to motor vehicle traffic. In addition, in one of the world's largest river deltas, many small but important bridges were wiped out by the storm, thereby impacting the local population's ability to travel. There are also important sluice gates that have been badly damaged. In some cases, these sluice gates were built to prevent salt water from entering agricultural land and destroying the crops.

¶12. (SBU) The reconstruction of the local economy also appears to be very slow. Many people lost their entire livelihoods (whether these were chicken coops, fishing boats, or rice crops), so they do not have any real collateral and/or income with which to start to rebuild. People called for access to cheap credit so that the small businesses could rebuild. In the past, villagers could turn to others in the community for loans. Now, however, since practically everyone was impoverished by the cyclone, everyone is scrambling to rebuild and this important source of capital is no longer available.

The loan amounts requested for these small business people ranged from 100,000 taka to 300,000 taka, which is higher than what is typically offered by the micro-credit organizations. In one area, the local union chairman told team members that his community is ready to restart shrimp farming, an activity that brings in revenue of 500,000 taka for a 200,000 taka investment in only three months. (NOTE: Aquaculture is Bangladesh's second largest export by value. In the last fiscal year, the country exported approximately USD 500 million in aquaculture products. END NOTE.) Unfortunately for this community there is no organization or group willing to provide the start-up funds. (NOTE: Within 30 days, USAID will use reprogrammed resources to initiate an aquaculture and shrimp program to help

rebuild livelihoods throughout the Sidr-affected areas. These reprogrammed resources will only meet a fraction of the need. END NOTE.)

IAT West Team Recommendations

¶13. (SBU) The reconstruction needs for these regions are significant and require quick to immediate attention. Within the next 60 days, food, cash-for-work programs and infrastructure repair are needed. If food supplies are rapidly diminishing in the area, then preparations to deliver food to the region should begin soon. In addition, cash-for-work infrastructure projects would give a boost to the local economy, help rebuild the region, and provide income for people to both purchase food and restart their lives. From an infrastructure perspective, particular care should be given to the sluice gates and/or embankments that prevent the contamination of crop fields; another lost crop would further debilitate a recovering economy and people. In addition, the region's need for potable water is real, and any projects designed to build ponds or sink tube wells would bring work and water to the region.

¶14. (SBU) In the next 60-180 days, the region needs to see a large scale effort to rebuild homes and community structures. Monsoon season arrives in May, and many people continue to live in makeshift accommodations. In addition, outside of the primary schools, many of the educational institutions are in shambles. In many of the secondary schools and madrassas the students study in the open air, which won't be possible during the monsoon season. Places of worship also have received little to no support from the government, and they appear to rely solely on private funding to rebuild,

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whether from the community or from other NGOs. Finally, more infrastructure projects should continue until the monsoon season to rebuild the roads, bridges, and levies that allow people and commerce to move freely.

¶15. (SBU) In the long term, large-scale infrastructure projects could truly revitalize the region, provide the foundation for real growth, and prevent future disasters like Cyclone Sidr from happening again. For example, an increase of five feet in the embankment in the South Khali sub-district in Sarankhola would have held back the devastating wave that washed away buildings and drowned precious livestock. Areas in these regions did not have electricity before Cyclone Sidr; efforts focused on bringing electricity to those people would improve lives and allow for more economic activity in the region. Several areas that we visited are unreachable by car, and our team had to travel by foot, motorcycle, and/or trawler to reach them. Large-scale road projects would allow the people in these communities to travel further to deliver products and find work. In addition, the continued building of multi-purpose cyclone shelters in these areas would serve two important needs: 1) an increase in solid concrete community structures that can serve as schools, religious institutions, or government buildings, and 2) a location to where people can flee if/when a similar catastrophic storm comes to this area of Bangladesh again. Finally, the people in the region are resilient, improving their access to cheap capital would allow them to rebuild their businesses or start new businesses.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) Over the last 20 days, the U.S. Government has done an intensive survey of these heavily impacted regions. The IAT West team witnessed first-hand a region that received adequate relief, but is only now starting to rebuild and without a great deal of visible outside assistance (in particular in the Morrelganj upazila). There are immediate, short-term, and long-term needs in the region that should be addressed. A large-scale commitment by the U.S. Government would bring much needed assistance to this region.

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